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Goals

Motives as Goals

One way motives vary is by the kind of goals that students set for themselves, and by how the goals support students' academic achievement. As you might suspect, some goals encourage academic achievement more than others, but even motives that do not concern academics explicitly tend to affect learning indirectly.

Goals that contribute to achievement

What kinds of achievement goals do students hold? Imagine three individuals, Maria, Sara, and Lindsay, who are taking algebra together. Maria's main concern is to learn the material as well as possible because she finds it interesting and because she believes it will be useful to her in later courses, perhaps at university. Hers is a mastery goal because she wants primarily to learn or master the material. Sara, however, is concerned less about algebra than about getting top marks on the exams and in the course. Hers is a performance goal because she is focused primarily on looking successful; learning algebra is merely a vehicle for performing well in the eyes of peers and teachers. Lindsay, for her part, is primarily concerned about avoiding a poor or failing mark. Hers is a [performance-avoidance](#) goal because she is not really as concerned about learning algebra, as Maria is, or about competitive success, as Sara is; she is simply intending to avoid failure.

As you might imagine, mastery and performance goals often are not experienced in pure form, but in combinations. If you play the clarinet in the school band, you might want to improve your technique simply because you enjoy playing as well as possible—essentially a mastery orientation. But you might also want to look talented in the eyes of classmates—a performance orientation. Another part of what you may wish, at least privately, is to avoid looking like a complete failure at playing the clarinet.

One of these motives may predominate over the others, but they all may be present.

Mastery goals tend to be associated with enjoyment of learning the material at hand, and in this sense represent an outcome that teachers often seek for students. By definition therefore they are a form of *intrinsic motivation*. As such mastery goals have been found to be better than performance goals at sustaining students' interest in a subject. In one review of research about learning goals, for example, students with primarily mastery orientations toward a course they were taking not only tended to express greater interest in the course, but also continued to express interest well beyond the official end of the course, and to enroll in further courses in the same subject (Harackiewicz, et al., 2002; Wolters, 2004).

Performance goals, on the other hand, imply *extrinsic motivation*, and tend to show the mixed effects of this orientation. A positive effect is that students with a performance orientation do tend to get higher grades than those who express primarily a mastery orientation. The advantage in grades occurs both in the short term (with individual assignments) and in the long term (with overall grade point average when graduating). But there is evidence that performance oriented students do not actually learn material as deeply or permanently as students who are more mastery oriented (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). A possible reason is that measures of performance—such as test scores—often reward relatively shallow memorization of information and therefore guide performance-oriented students away from processing the information thoughtfully or deeply. Another possible reason is that a performance orientation, by focusing on gaining recognition as the best among peers, encourages competition among peers. Giving and receiving help from classmates is thus not in the self-interest of a performance-oriented student, and the resulting isolation limits the student's learning.

Social goals

Most students need and value relationships, both with classmates and with teachers, and often (though not always) they get a good deal of positive

support from the relationships. But the effects of social relationships are complex, and at times can work both for and against academic achievement. If a relationship with the teacher is important and reasonably positive, then the student is likely to try pleasing the teacher by working hard on assignments (Dowson & McInerney, 2003). Note, though, that this effect is closer to performance than mastery; the student is primarily concerned about looking good to someone else. If, on the other hand, a student is especially concerned about relationships with peers, the effects on achievement depend on the student's motives for the relationship, as well as on peers' attitudes. Desiring to be close to peers personally may lead a student to ask for help from, and give help to peers—a behavior that may support higher achievement, at least up to a point. But desiring to impress peers with skills and knowledge may lead to the opposite: as we already mentioned, the competitive edge of such a performance orientation may keep the student from collaborating, and in this indirect way reduce a student's opportunities to learn. The abilities and achievement motivation of peers themselves can also make a difference, but once again the effects vary depending on the context. Low achievement and motivation by peers affects an individual's academic motivation more in elementary school than in high school, more in learning mathematics than learning to read, and more if there is a wide *range* of abilities in a classroom than if there is a more narrow range (Burke & Sass, 2006).

Note: Much of the material from this topic was adapted from (Seifert and Sutton, 2011).

Motivation

What Is Motivation?

Motivation—the energy or drive that gives behavior direction and focus—can be understood in a variety of ways, each of which has implications for learning. Like motivation itself, theories of it are full of diversity.

One perspective on motivation comes from behaviorism, and equates underlying drives or motives with their outward, visible expression in behavior. Most others, however, come from cognitive theories of learning and development. Motives are affected by the kind of goals set by students—whether they are oriented to mastery, performance, failure avoidance, or social contact. They are also affected by students' interests, both personal and situational.

A major current perspective about motivation is based on self-efficacy theory, which focuses on a person's belief that he or she is capable of carrying out or mastering a task. High self-efficacy affects students' choice of tasks, their persistence at tasks, and their resilience in the face of failure. It helps to prevent learned helplessness, a perception of complete lack of control over mastery or success. Teachers can encourage high self-efficacy beliefs by providing students with experiences of mastery and opportunities to see others' experiences of mastery, by offering well-timed messages persuading them of their capacity for success, and by interpreting students' emotional reactions to success, failure and stress.

An extension of self-efficacy theory is expectancy-value theory, which posits that our motivation for a specific task is a combination of our expectation of success and how important or valuable the task is to us. Yet another related idea is self-determination theory, which is based on the concept that everyone has basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others. According to the theory, students will be motivated more intrinsically if these three needs are met as much as possible.

Behavioral Views of Motivation

Sometimes it is useful to think of motivation not as something “inside” a student driving the student’s behavior, but as *equivalent* to the student’s outward behaviors. This is the perspective of behaviorism. In its most orthodox form, behaviorism focuses almost completely on what can be directly seen or heard about a person’s behavior, and has relatively few comments about what may lie behind (or “underneath” or “inside”) the behavior. When it comes to motivation, this perspective means minimizing or even ignoring the distinction between the inner drive or energy of students, and the outward behaviors that express the drive or energy. The two are considered the same, or nearly so.

Equating the inner and the outward might seem to violate common sense. How can a student do something without some sort of feeling or thought to make the action happen? As we will explain, this very question has led to alternative models of motivation that are based on cognitive rather than behaviorist theories of learning. We will explain some of these later. Before getting to them, however, we encourage you to consider the advantages of a behaviorist perspective on motivation.

Operant conditioning as a way of motivating

The most common version of the behavioral perspective on motivation is the theory of *operant conditioning* associated with B. F. Skinner (1938, 1957). Behaviorism is a theory of learning, but the same operant model can be transformed into an account of motivation. In the operant model, a behavior being learned (the “operant”) increases in frequency or likelihood because performing it makes a reinforcement available. To understand this model in terms of motivation, think of the *likelihood* of response as the motivation and the *reinforcement* as the motivator. Imagine, for example, that a student learns by operant conditioning to answer questions during class discussions: each time the student answers a question (the operant), the teacher praises (reinforces) this behavior.

In addition to thinking of this situation as behavioral *learning*, however, you can also think of it in terms of *motivation*: the likelihood of the student answering questions (the motivation) is increasing because of the teacher’s praise (the motivator). Many concepts from operant conditioning, in fact,

can be understood in motivational terms. Another one, for example, is the concept of [extinction](#), a sort of “unlearning”, or at least a decrease in performance of previously learned. The decrease in performance frequency can be thought of as a loss of motivation, and removal of the reinforcement can be thought of as removal of the motivator. The following table summarizes this way of reframing operant conditioning in terms of motivation.

Concept	Definition phrased in terms of learning	Definition phrased in terms of motivation	Classroom example
Operant	Behavior that becomes more likely because of reinforcement	Behavior that suggests an increase in motivation	Student listens to teacher’s comments during lecture or discussion
Reinforcement	Stimulus that increases likelihood of a behavior	Stimulus that motivates	Teacher praises student for listening
Positive reinforcement	Stimulus that <i>increases</i> likelihood of a behavior by being <i>introduced</i> or	Stimulus that motivates by its <i>presence</i> ;	Teacher makes encouraging remarks about

	<i>added</i> to a situation	an “incentive”	student’s homework
Negative reinforcement	Stimulus that <i>increases</i> the likelihood of a behavior by being <i>removed</i> or taken away from a situation	Stimulus that motivates by its <i>absence</i> or <i>avoidance</i>	Teacher cancels a quiz after students turn in homework every day this week
Punishment	Stimulus that <i>decreases</i> the likelihood of a behavior by being <i>introduced</i> or <i>added</i> to a situation	Stimulus that <i>decreases</i> motivation by its <i>presence</i>	Teacher deducts points for late homework
Extinction	Removal of reinforcement for a behavior	Removal of motivating stimulus that leads to decrease in motivation	Teacher stops commenting altogether about student’s homework
Shaping successive approximations	Reinforcements for behaviors that gradually resemble (approximate) a final goal behavior	Stimuli that gradually shift motivation toward a	Teacher praises student for returning homework a bit closer to the

		final goal motivation	deadline; gradually she only praises for actually being on time
Continuous reinforcement	Reinforcement that occurs <i>each</i> time that an operant behavior occurs	Motivator that occurs <i>each</i> time that a behavioral sign of motivation occurs	Teacher praises highly active student for <i>every</i> time he works for five minutes without interruption
Intermittent reinforcement	Reinforcement that <i>sometimes</i> occurs following an operant behavior, but not on every occasion	Motivator that occurs <i>sometimes</i> when a behavioral sign of motivation occurs, but not on every occasion	Teacher praises highly active student <i>sometimes</i> when he works without interruption, but not every time

Operant conditioning as learning and as motivation

Cautions about behavioral perspectives on motivation

The use of reinforcements can backfire if a teacher relies on rewarding behaviors that she alone has chosen, or even if she persists in reinforcing behaviors that students already find motivating without external reinforcement. Instead of serving as an incentive to desired behavior, reinforcement can become a reminder of the teacher's power and of students' lack of control over their own actions. A classic research study of intrinsic motivation illustrated the problem nicely. In the study, researchers rewarded university students for two activities—solving puzzles and writing newspaper headlines—that they already found interesting. Some of the students, however, were *paid* to do these activities, whereas others were not. Under these conditions, the students who were paid were *less* likely to engage in the activities following the experiment than were the students who were not paid, even though both groups had been equally interested in the activities to begin with (Deci, 1971). The extrinsic reward of payment, it seemed, interfered with the intrinsic reward of working the puzzles.

In another study, early adolescents studying nutrition topics were told that learning the material would enhance either their physical appearance, an extrinsic goal focus, or health, an intrinsic goal focus (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, & Matos, L., 2005). Those students focusing on the extrinsic goal did better on tests of rote learning while those focusing on the intrinsic goal did better on conceptual learning. In other words, extrinsic goals appear to promote superficial strategies such as memorization, while intrinsic goals seem to enhance deeper learning (Vansteenkiste, et al., 2005).

Many studies have confirmed these effects in numerous situations, though they have also found certain conditions where extrinsic [rewards](#) do *not* reduce intrinsic rewards. Extrinsic rewards are not as harmful, for example, if a person is paid “by the hour” (i.e. by a flat rate) rather than piecemeal (by the number of items completed) (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Eisenberger & Cameron, 1996). They also are less harmful if the task itself is relatively well-defined (like working math problems or playing solitaire) and high-quality performance is expected at all times. So there are still times and ways when externally determined reinforcements are useful and effective. In general, however, extrinsic rewards do seem to undermine intrinsic motivation often enough that they need to be used selectively and thoughtfully (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001). As it happens, help with being

selective and thoughtful can be found in the other, more cognitively oriented theories of motivation. These use the goals, interests, and beliefs of students as ways of explaining differences in students' motives and in how the motives affect engagement with school.

Self-Efficacy

In addition to being influenced by their goals and interests, students' motives are affected by *specific* beliefs about the student's personal capacities. In **self-efficacy theory** the beliefs become a primary, explicit explanation for motivation (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). **Self-efficacy** is an individual's belief that he/she is capable of carrying out a specific task or of reaching a specific goal. Note that the belief and the action or goal are *specific*. Your self-efficacy is your beliefs about whether or not you can write an acceptable term paper, for example, or repair an automobile, or make friends with the new student in class. These are relatively specific beliefs and tasks. Self-efficacy is not about whether you believe that you are intelligent in general, whether you always like working with mechanical things, or think that you are generally a likeable person. These more general judgments are better regarded as various mixtures of *self-concepts* (beliefs about general personal identity) or of *self-esteem* (evaluations of identity). They are important in their own right, and sometimes influence motivation, but only indirectly (Bong & Skaalvik, 2004).

Self-efficacy beliefs, furthermore, are not the same as "true" or documented skill or ability. They are *self-*constructed, meaning that they are personally developed perceptions. There can sometimes therefore be discrepancies between a person's self-efficacy beliefs and the person's abilities. You can believe that you can write a good term paper, for example, without actually being able to do so, and vice versa: you can believe yourself *incapable* of writing a paper, but discover that you *are* in fact able to do so. In this way self-efficacy is like the everyday idea of *confidence*, except that it is defined more precisely. And as with confidence, it is possible to have either too much or too little self-efficacy. The optimum level seems to be either at or slightly above true capacity (Bandura, 1997). As we indicate below, large discrepancies between self-efficacy and ability can create motivational problems for the individual.

Effects of self-efficacy on students' behavior

Self-efficacy may sound like a uniformly desirable quality, but research suggests that its effects are a bit more complicated than they first appear. Self-efficacy has three main effects, each of which has both a negative or undesirable side and a positive or desirable side.

Choice of tasks

The first effect is that self-efficacy makes students more willing to choose tasks where they already feel confident of succeeding. While this seems intuitive, given the definition of the concept of self-efficacy, it has also been supported by research on self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). For teachers, the effect on choice can be either welcome or not, depending on circumstances. If a student believes that he or she can solve mathematical problems, then the student is more likely to attempt the mathematics homework that the teacher assigns.

Unfortunately the converse is also true. If a student believes that he or she is *incapable* of math, then the student is *less* likely to attempt the math homework (perhaps telling himself, "What's the use of trying?"), regardless of the student's actual ability in math.

Since self-efficacy is self-constructed, furthermore, it is also possible for students to miscalculate or misperceive their true skill, and the misperceptions themselves can have complex effects on students' motivations. All may be well if students overestimate their capacity but actually do succeed at a relevant task anyway, or if they underestimate their capacity, yet discover that they *can* succeed and raise their self-efficacy beliefs as a result. All may not be well, though, if students do not believe that they can succeed and therefore do not even try, or if students overestimate their capacity by a wide margin, but are disappointed unexpectedly by failure and lower their self-efficacy beliefs.

Persistence at tasks

A second effect of high self-efficacy is to increase persistence at relevant tasks. If you believe that you can solve crossword puzzles, but encounter one that takes longer than usual, then you are more likely to work longer at the puzzle until you (hopefully) really do solve it. This is probably a desirable behavior in many situations, unless the persistence happens to interfere with other, more important tasks (what if you should be doing homework instead of working on crossword puzzles?). If you happen to have low self-efficacy for crosswords, on the other hand, then you are more likely to give up early on a difficult puzzle. Giving up early may often be undesirable because it deprives you of a chance to improve your skill by persisting. Then again, the consequent lack of success because of giving up may provide a useful incentive to improve your crossword skills. And again, misperceptions of capacity make a difference. Overestimating your capacity by a lot (excessively high self-efficacy) might lead you not to prepare for or focus on a task properly, and thereby impair your performance. So as with choosing tasks, the effects of self-efficacy vary from one individual to another and one situation to another.

Example:

[Self-Efficacy, Illustrated](#)

This flash animation illustrates the journey of a teacher and student as the student's self-efficacy increases. Sammy has low self-esteem, but his teacher sees a teachable moment in his desire to act and sing. She employs verbal persuasion with positive statements and peer modeling by having Sammy observe another successful classmate who had the same fears. She provides Sammy with specific feedback on his performance, and Sammy has a successful experience in his tryout as a result. By Jim Stewart, Jill Weldon, Celeste Buckhalter- Pittman, and Holly Frilot.

Source: Orey (2010).

Response to failure

High self-efficacy for a task not only increases a person's persistence at the task, but also improves their ability to cope with stressful conditions and to recover their motivation following outright failures. Suppose that you have two assignments—an essay and a science lab report—due on the same day, and this circumstance promises to make your life hectic as you approach the deadline. You will cope better with the stress of multiple assignments if you already believe yourself capable of doing both of the tasks, than if you believe yourself capable of doing just one of them or (especially) of doing neither. You will also recover better in the unfortunate event that you end up with a poor grade on one or even both of the tasks.

That is the good news. The bad news is that the same resilience can sometimes also serve non-academic and non-school purposes. Suppose, instead of two school assignments due on the same day, a student has only one school assignment due, but also holds a part-time evening job as a server in a local restaurant. Suppose, further, that the student has high self-efficacy for both of these tasks; he believes, in other words, that he is capable of completing the assignment as well as continuing to work at the job.

The result of such resilient beliefs can easily be a student who devotes *less* attention to school work than ideal, and who even ends up with a *lower* grade on the assignment than he or she is capable of.

Sources of self-efficacy beliefs

Psychologists who study self-efficacy have identified four major sources of self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares & Schunk, 2001, 2002). In order of importance they are (1) prior experiences of mastering tasks, (2) watching others' mastering tasks, (3) messages or "persuasion" from others, and (4) emotions related to stress and discomfort.

Prior experiences of mastery

Not surprisingly, past successes at a task increase students' beliefs that they will succeed again in the future. The implication of this basic fact means that students need to have a history of successes. Whether they are math problems, reading assignments, or athletic activities, tasks have to end with success more often than with failure. Note, though, that the successes have to represent mastery that is genuine or competence that is truly authentic. Success at tasks that are trivial or irrelevant do not improve self-efficacy beliefs, nor does praise for successes that a student has not really had (Erikson, 1968/1994).

Watching others' experiences of mastery

A second source of efficacy beliefs comes from [vicarious experience of mastery](#), or observing others' successes (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). Simply seeing someone else succeed at a task, in other words, can contribute to believing that you, too, can succeed. The effect is stronger when the observer lacks experience with the task and therefore may be unsure of his or her own ability. It is also stronger when the model is someone respected by the observer, such as a student's teacher, or a peer with generally comparable ability. Even under these conditions, though, vicarious experience is not as influential as direct experience. The reasons are not hard to imagine.

Suppose, for example, you witness both your teacher and a respected friend succeed at singing a favorite tune, but you are unsure whether you personally can sing. In that case you may feel encouraged about your own potential, but are likely still to feel somewhat uncertain of your own efficacy. If on the other hand you do *not* witness others' singing, but you have a history of singing well yourself, it is a different story. In that case you are likely to believe in your efficacy, regardless of how others perform.

Expectancy-Value Theory

By now, it should be clear that motivation is affected by several factors, including reinforcement for behavior, but especially also students' goals, interests, and sense of self-efficacy. The factors combine to create two general sources of motivation: students' expectation of success and the value that students place on a goal. Viewing motivation in this way is often called the expectancy-value model of motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002; Wigfield, Tonk, & Eccles, 2004), and sometimes written with a multiplicative formula: $\text{expectancy} \times \text{value} = \text{motivation}$. The relationship between expectation and value is "multiplicative" rather than additive because in order to be motivated, it is necessary for a person to have at least a modest expectation of success and to assign a task at least some positive value. If you have high expectations of success but do not value a task at all (mentally assign it a "0" value), then you will not feel motivated at all. Likewise, if you value a task highly but have no expectation of success about completing it (assign it a "0" expectancy), then you also will not feel motivated at all.

Ideally both expectancies and values are high in students on any key learning task. Expectancies are the result of various factors, but particularly the goals held by a student, and the student's [self-efficacy](#). A student with [mastery goals](#) and strong self-efficacy for a task, for example, is likely to hold high expectations for success—almost by definition. Values are also the result of various factors, but especially students' interests and feelings of [self-determination](#). A student who has a lasting [personal interest](#) in a task or topic and is allowed to choose it freely is especially likely to value the task—and therefore to feel motivated.

Raising the value of academic tasks is equally important, but the general strategies for doing so are different than for raising expectations. Increasing value requires linking the task to one's own personal interests and prior knowledge, realizing the utility of the task to one's future goals, and becoming aware that the task is valuable to other people whom one respects.

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